Social smoking

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THE TRUTH ABOUT...

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What is social smoking?

Social smoking is a pattern of tobacco use based on the context of use (for example, smoking more in social settings like pubs, bars, nightclubs, and sporting or music events than when alone). These social situations act as social cues or triggers to tobacco use. A daily smoker is a person who smokes cigarettes every day. An occasional smoker is a person who smokes cigarettes but not every day. Social smoking is often identified with occasional use, but even some daily smokers may smoke more in social situations.

How many social smokers become regular smokers, how many quit and how many continue to smoke occasionally is not yet clear. What is clear is that social smoking is a distinct pattern of tobacco use common among young adults that may lead to addiction.

Tobacco companies have targeted young adults in social settings as part of their marketing strategy. They view young adulthood as a key transitional time and have identified several stages in the addiction process from initiation to becoming a "confirmed" smoker that extend through young adulthood. For more information on the tobacco industry, see other topics in this series.

Who are social smokers?

People who smoke mainly or only in social settings, and in the presence of others (particularly other smokers), often call themselves "social smokers." Social smokers may be called "socially cued smokers." They may also be included in a larger group of smokers called "occasional smokers." Social smokers tend to drink more alcohol than non-smokers and they tend to smoke more when they are in social situations than when they are alone. They may not consider themselves "smokers" or regular tobacco users and do not appear to have developed an addiction to nicotine. They tend to be confident in their ability to quit. Like other smokers, social smokers are much more likely than those who have never smoked to have relatives or friends who smoke.

A greater proportion of young adults are starting to smoke after the age of 18 than in the past and social smoking may be one of the reasons. At least one in 10 post-secondary students who smokes and perhaps as many as one in five current smokers in the general population began smoking as an adult. Young adults (aged 20 to 24) also have the highest smoking rate of any age group in Canada. This is also true for Alberta, where the smoking rate for current (occasional and daily) smokers aged 20 to 24 was 28 per cent in 2004. In Alberta, seven per cent of 20- to

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24-year-olds were occasional smokers in 2004. However, not all occasional smokers smoke in a social pattern and some daily smokers may be social smokers too. Because of this, it is difficult to determine exact numbers of social smokers. However, U.S. studies have estimated that between 30 per cent and 51 per cent of young adults who are current smokers are social smokers.

Why do people smoke socially?

Social smokers are much more likely than people who have never smoked to go to bars and clubs at least occasionally. They may smoke because they want to join in the activities of drinking and smoking in such settings. Many social smokers like to smoke when they are drinking alcohol.

Although occasional smokers worry about the health consequences and the financial cost of smoking and want to avoid addiction, many also feel more adventurous and more daring when they smoke. They also feel more confident and more glamorous, and see tobacco use as a way to relax, pass time and have more fun.

Young adulthood is a critical time of change. Young adults take on greater roles and responsibilities in work or studies and enter new social environments for the first time. But they are also still young and in need of peer approval. The role of social influence in smoking initiation and progression is well known. Tobacco industry documents reveal that tobacco companies use their knowledge of this transition time strategically in their tobacco marketing campaigns.

For more information on the tobacco industry, see other topics in this series.

What are the health risks?

Researchers say there is no safe level of tobacco consumption because of the cancer-causing properties of tobacco. The social smoker, like anyone who smokes, is vulnerable to the harmful health consequences of using tobacco. These include numerous cancers, respiratory diseases, cardiovascular diseases, and premature death. Several recent studies have shown that using even small amounts of tobacco (in some cases as low as one to four cigarettes per day) significantly increases the risk of harmful health effects including heart disease, cancer and premature death. Even smokers who do not inhale may be at higher risk than non-smokers for premature death. As well, social smokers are typically in social settings with other smokers and are likely to be more frequently exposed to second-hand smoke. This makes social smokers even more vulnerable to the damaging health effects of second-hand smoke, including lung cancer, heart disease, nasal sinus cancer, middle ear disease, and a variety of respiratory conditions such as asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia.

The British Lung Foundation has warned that the pattern of social smoking (smoking a lot in a short time) may be more damaging to a smoker's heart and lungs than smoking the same amount over the course of a day.

In addition, the risk of dying from lung cancer increases with the number of cigarettes smoked per day, but how long you've smoked is the strongest risk

factor. The younger you start smoking and the longer you continue, the more you are exposed to cancer-causing chemicals. On the other hand, if you quit smoking, your risks of getting lung cancer will decrease the longer you stay smoke-free.

Alcohol and social smoking

Social smokers tend to drink more alcohol than non-smokers and enjoy smoking and drinking at the same time. Both tobacco use and alcohol use separately have been linked with cancers of the mouth, throat and esophagus. Furthermore, studies suggest that use of tobacco with alcohol may account for about 75 per cent of all cases of mouth and throat cancer. Drinking alcohol while using tobacco increases the risks of cancer of the mouth, throat, larynx, esophagus and liver even more than either drinking alcohol or using tobacco by itself. This may be because alcohol facilitates the absorption of the carcinogens found in tobacco.

Social smokers and smoking bans

Social smokers may be more likely than daily smokers to quit smoking in response to smoking bans and no-smoking bylaws. Social smokers may not be physically addicted to nicotine and are likely to reduce or quit smoking if they cannot smoke in the social settings (bars, coffee shops, nightclubs, etc.) that they are used to. Smoking bans help to make smoking socially unacceptable. They increase the stigma and hassle of smoking and remove some of the social cues to smoke.

A 1999 study by the Department of Public Health, University of Western Australia concluded that one in nine smokers would quit smoking once a smoke-free bylaw was adopted. The California Department of Health Services credits, in part, strict smoking bans for the state's low smoking rate, which at 15% is the lowest in the country. One of the goals behind the smoking bans was to change the social norm of smoking. In New York City, the number of adult smokers fell by 500,000 in four years, in part because of smoking bans in restaurants, bars and offices. Experience seems to suggest that smoking bans are particularly effective with this population.

Are social smokers addicted?

Many long-term smokers start out as social or occasional smokers and find they are not able to limit their smoking or quit when they want. Recent research suggests social or occasional smoking is not risk free and that occasional smokers can actually be addicted.

A University of Wisconsin (2004) study published in the American Psychological Association journal *Health Psychology* found that almost 90 percent of college students who were daily smokers and 50 percent of occasional smokers were still smoking four years later. The results dispel the mistaken belief that most young adults who smoke can easily give up tobacco use within a few years.

However, social and occasional smoking can be seen as a transition stage, either towards quitting or uptake, and represents an opportunity for

education and possible intervention. The good news is that if a person is really only smoking in social situations – and these are not daily situations – they are likely at a lower level of dependence. If properly motivated these smokers should be able to quit completely. For more information on quitting smoking, see other topics in this series.

Want to know more?

For more information, contact your local AADAC Area Office, or visit the AADAC website at www.aadac.com.